SPRINGS OF DELIGHT

The Return to Life

WILLIAM JAMES’S “SPRINGS OF DELIGHT”

Phil Oliver
William James’s
“Springs of Delight”
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WILLIAM JAMES’S “SPRINGS OF DELIGHT”

The Return to Life

Phil Oliver

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Nashville
For Sharon, Emma, and Katie—

my own springs of deepest delight
To begin with, how can things so insecure as the successful experiences of this world afford a stable anchorage? A chain is no stronger than its weakest link, and life is after all a chain . . .

*Varieties of Religious Experience*

The really vital question for us all is, What is this world going to be? What is life eventually to make of itself? The centre of gravity of philosophy must therefore alter its place. The earth of things, long thrown into shadow by the glories of the upper ether, must resume its rights.

*Pragmatism*
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Preface and Acknowledgments

Ours is a planet sown in beings. Our generations overlap like shingles…. Once we get here, we spend forever on the globe, most of it tucked under. While we breathe, we open time like a path in the grass. We open time as a boat’s stem slits the crest of the present.

—Annie Dillard, For the Time Being

Asked what my work on William James is about, I am always challenged to find a pithy reply. So wide was the range of James’s concerns, so enduring is his broad relevance, and so habituated am I to finding a Jamesian slant on everything, that any terse statement feels irresponsibly shallow and misleading. But summaries are helpful, especially to prospective readers.

This book is, therefore, about the centrality for life of personal enthusiasms and habitual “delights” and their power to make our days meaningful, delightful, spiritual, and even transcendent. Such enthusiasms, or subjective ways of reacting to life and upon it, are natural for us. They are at the heart of a vision of life at once spiritual and deeply rooted in “the open air and possibilities of nature.”1 When our days become pale, tedious, or abstract, they sponsor our “return to life” in all its rich, robust, and personal concreteness. The natural provenance of such enthusiasms distinguishes them from the putatively supernatural incursions of convulsive “Enthusiasm” that Harold Bloom finds at the core of “the American Religion.”2 Jamesian transcendence is thus a variety of naturalism, though decidedly not that “present day materialism, which may better be called naturalism,” which “leave[s] the destinies of the world at the mercy of its blinder parts and forces.”3 Jamesian naturalism, while not naïve about those impersonal forces that largely shape material reality, assigns a destiny-shaping, evolutionary role to the emergent personal and cultural forces of intelligence and the human spirit as gifts of nature that may come one day to exert
constructive influence on all our affairs. It finds nothing incongruous about nature and spirit in harness together. In fact, “the conception of spirit, as we mortals hitherto have framed it, is itself too gross to cover the exquisite tenuity of nature’s facts.” We, in our teeming subjective particularity, are nature’s most exquisite natural fact. We personalize nature:

The only form of thing that we directly encounter, the only experience that we concretely have, is our own personal life. . . . And this systematic denial on science’s part of personality as a condition of events, this rigorous belief that in its own essential and innermost nature our world is a strictly impersonal world, may, conceivably, as the whirligig of time goes round, prove to be the very defect that our descendants will be most surprised at in our own boasted science, the omission that to their eyes will most tend to make it look perspectiveless and short.

Jamesian naturalism and the transcendence it favors have to do with the unique, partly incommunicable ways in which each of us may make vital connection with our respective personal, spiritual natures. It notices and celebrates our differences; but in the same glance it recognizes their anchorage in something we share, not just a common biology but especially a common capacity for embracing our own enthusiasms, just as we extend sympathetic respect for those of our compadres, ancestors, and descendants. In that light Jamesian transcendence is also about overcoming narrow egotism and expanding our sense of who we are, individually and as a species across time and space.

What objects of enthusiasm can imaginably promise so much? Any we can imagine, and then some—baseball, say, or the Beatles, beer, Great Britain, literature, science, science fiction, Monet, Mozart, Kentucky whiskey, Tennessee walking horses, walking, running, tilling the soil, raising kids, healing, praying, meditating, thinking, teaching, learning, and on and on. Whatever disparate items may show up on anyone’s list (these are a few that crop up in my own family circle), their crucial essence is to point at, but not to replicate or make transparent to others’ grasp, the depths of experience and personal significance they attempt to name. I can tell you that I love baseball, but I cannot begin to convey precisely why or how or the extent to which baseball is important for my peculiar ways of experiencing and living in the world. By the same token your account of the joys of macramé, soccer, or cat-dancing will leave me in the dark. But it is a darkness rimmed by the glow of a phenomenon we should all recognize and treasure.

This book, then, is a paradoxical rumination on possibilities of delight both beyond but still, somehow, to some unspecifically partial extent, expressible in words. James, like the most thoughtful philosophers and poets,
wavered between the earnest wish to affirm and extend our humanistic inheritance of understanding and sympathy through language ("philosophy is essentially talkative and explicit") and an acute awareness of the intrinsic limitations of language that foreshadows the pragmatic elevation of deeds over creeds, actions over words, and engaged spontaneity over cool detachment. "The philosophy which is so important in each of us is not a technical matter; it is our more or less dumb sense of what life honestly and deeply means," a sense better enacted and enjoyed than enunciated. This creative tension was not resolved by James, who never stopped talking about the insufficiencies of talk:

I am tiring myself and you, I know, by vainly seeking to describe by concepts and words what . . . exceeds either conceptualization or verbalization. As long as one continues talking, intellectualism remains in undisturbed possession of the field. The return to life can’t come about by talking. It is an act; to make you return to life, I must set an example for your imitation, I must deafen you to talk, or to the importance of talk. . . . Or I must point, point to the mere that of life, and you by inner sympathy must fill out the what for yourselves.

Having thus acknowledged the irony in pitching more words at rich phenomena that must elude them, I should explain the remainder of my title. James’s richly imagistic phrase “springs of delight” equivocates judiciously between connotations of mechanism and organic nature, implying (as James does in general) the shared and natural sources of the varieties of human flourishing. Our transcendentally delightful moments spring proximally from the body’s marvelous biomechanism, and subjectivity modulates them with personal symbolism and the seeming spontaneity of pure and cleansing waters gushing from unplumbed depths. But then, curse our masochistically curious souls, we reflect and descend:

A little cooling down of animal excitability and instinct, a little loss of animal toughness, a little irritable weakness and descent of the pain-threshold, will bring the worm at the core of all our usual springs of delight into full view, and turn us into melancholy metaphysicians.

But usually, after suffering the “falling dead of the delight,” we rebound: “the music can commence again;—and again and again—at intervals.” Our natural condition is to know both aspects of experience in turn, delighted “animal” spontaneity and angst-ridden cerebration. Our challenge is to reconcile them; our method, an uneasy mix of philosophy and untutored experience; our enemies, metaphysical malaise and that excessive intellectualism that discredits experience in advance. And our holy grail, the pearl of
inestimable price, is no less than the promise and prospect of happiness, flourishing and fulfillment for ourselves and our kind.

Jamesian transcendence is not hostile to the verbal arts and, for some of us, is even inseparable from them. But it draws deeply from those subjective, personal realms of experience that in their fullness are truly beyond words, mysteriously and delightfully implicating “the fact that individuals vary from the human average in all sorts of directions...” and dance to very different “music.” Spontaneous deviation from the norm is not a total mystery, of course. The more we learn of our own evolutionary epic and the rich and growing complexity of life, the more we will have to say about the numinous nature that is our native habitat. But we can be confident and grateful that life will always exceed and overspill our words and, when they lure us into confusion or insubstantiality, will beckon our return.

The human spirit is intrinsically, inescapably personal but is also vitally related. If my book is occasionally more confessional than much contemporary philosophy, that is because my own vital relations have brought home to me the wisdom of “bond[ing] the personal narrative voice...to the human search for transcendence.” James says of Whitman that although he wrote autobiographically and in the first person, his practice was not from personal conceit but from the desire to speak expansively and vicariously for all. Perhaps Whitman was ambitious, maybe presumptuous, but well motivated nonetheless. I intend my own voice in these pages to be illustratively personal, not exhibitionistic; but I know of no way to express the full meaning and importance of our subjective enthusiasms and commitments without speaking of my own. It may be customary to philosophize about such matters in abstraction and to hold subjectivity at arm’s length from transcendence. My approach, however, is more like Thoreau’s: “I should not talk so much about myself if there was anybody else whom I knew as well.” And Kierkegaard was right: Life is understood backwards but lived forwards—a homily best funded as the recognition that life is lived personally and concretely. There may be such a thing as a fallacy of misplaced concreteness, but not when it comes to understanding “the exuberant excess of [our] subjective propensities” and the resulting spiritual dimensions of the subjective imagination.

Spirituality is the link of continuity between every human breath, every moment, and every epoch. It is what binds the personal, the social, and the philosophical. Life, as James says, is a chain: a flowing stream of succession to which we may contribute, not only through the spires of our genes but more overtly in our voluntary devotions and ideals. The living breath that measures our moments and days also marks the distance between an attentive present, coveted futures, and life’s remote denouement. Respiration, inspiration, and aspiration are entwined aspects of the vision of life as a chain.
The year 1998 was full of remarkable, even surreal contrasts. It was an ignoble year: a sitting president of the United States found himself obliged to testify publicly about matters once thought too indelicate for words, especially those emanating from the mythically hallowed halls of the people's House and the Congress. He was required to defend his interest in the sublime artistry of our great national poet of democratic transcendence as other than just more proof of his own degeneracy. (Indeed, the president's accusers found his gift of *Leaves of Grass* provocative and possibly salacious.) But for me it was also a year of stunning, gratifying reverse: a new home-run king was crowned, and many of us who think the game sometimes "radiates a spiritual transcendence" were seduced to end our unhappy estrangement. Baseball's spring is again, for those of us captivated by that old spell of our childhood, a recurrent source of delight.

Nineteen ninety-eight also brought a particularly personal day of transcendent delight; on a crisp February morning, my Vanderbilt faculty advisors—John Lachs, Michael Hodges, John Compton, John Post, and Paul Dokecki—approved an early version of this work and granted my admission to the club of credentialed scholars. Dr. Lachs's deft but unobtrusive direction allowed me finally to subdue the "Ph.D. Octopus" and discover the "personal and spiritual spontaneity" whose expression James considered higher education's greatest and most sadly neglected custodial responsibility. In true Jamesian style, Dr. Lachs "barge[s] into the philosopher's lecture hall with the direct concerns of everyday life" to help his students "decide or discover what is important for them in their lives." He personifies teaching's ideal.

I am indebted to so many inspirational friends, former colleagues, and teachers that I cannot thank them all here by name. I am very grateful to my family for their unstinting support, and particularly to my father, Dr. James C. Oliver, for all his exemplary ways (not only with words). I appreciate my in-laws, the Roths of Hohenwald, Tennessee, for their tireless help, and especially for their daughter. My wife, Dr. Sharon Roth, is a relentless motivator. Perhaps I could have done it without her, but I would not have. And thanks to our daughters Emma and Katie, I have also learned that "daily companionship with a questioning child is a reminder of what intelligence is for—not, ultimately, for dominion, but for communion." This book is better for being the product of a writer whose stake in the future is as tangible as the flesh and blood and (I now understand) the spirit of precious others whose flourishing I cannot, *would* not distinguish from my own. American philosophers typically assert a preference for living realities over remote abstractions. My family has taught me what that means.

I thank everyone at Vanderbilt University Press for their equable professionalism in shepherding this book into print. I am proud to contribute to the important and growing Vanderbilt Library of American Philosophy.
Despite my reservations about the impact of computing in our time, I am happy to acknowledge the critical assistance of colleagues encountered in the cyberspace of various Internet forums. Their mediated presence can be invaluable to those of us who have sometimes toiled, as I have, outside the conventional vineyards of academe.

And speaking of computers: in giddy anticipation of “Y2K,” a surprising number of “survivalists” were taken more than half seriously, by as many normally sensible folk, in their apocalyptic predictions of a millennial crash when “the machine[s] stop” counting years. But hope springs eternal for those who greet the future in the spirit of William James, with a stirring awareness of real risk, a promise of real gain, and the zestful expectancy that best suits an open, evolving, personal and pluralistic universe.

Nashville, Tennessee
August 2000
Introduction

The Glimmer and Twinkle of Jamesian Transcendence

Philosophy lives in words, but truth and fact well up into our lives in ways that exceed verbal formulation. There is in the living act of perception always something that glimmers and twinkles and will not be caught, and for which reflection comes too late. No one knows this as well as the philosopher. He must fire his volley of new vocables out of his conceptual shotgun, for his profession condemns him to this industry; but he secretly knows the hollowness and irrelevancy... In the religious sphere, in particular, belief that formulas are true can never wholly take the place of personal experience.

Varieties of Religious Experience

trans-end-dance: the ability to move beyond the end, otherwise called the dance of death.

Peter Ackroyd, The Plato Papers: A Prophesy

“Circumscription of the Topic”: Taking Experience Seriously

“Transcendence” is a rich but imprecise notion, calling up a wide range of overlapping associations. It may provoke thoughts of religion, spirituality, serenity, reverie, fantasy, enlightenment, ineffability, meditation, mysticism, metaphysics (in either the traditional or the New Age sense) the meaning of life, the denial of death, art and aestheticism, psychopharmacology, neuropathology, parapsychology, or even epistemology; to skim only a portion of a list that scrolls on and on. But Andrew Delbanco, bemoaning the spiritual vacuity of an age so caught up in the borrowed prestige of brand identity, writes that “the idea of transcendence has detached itself from any current symbology” save that of mass market advertising (“the golden arches and the Nike swoosh”).

Transcendence may seem to be about God, or it may be sacredly secular and humanistic. Secular, humanistic, and sacred? Those who find “secular
humanism” intrinsically profane will not grasp, as James did, the possibility of this triple yoking. Dewey also affirmed this possibility, as do many liberals, Unitarian Universalists, and other “progressive” minorities in our time. Habit and convention, not empirical perspicacity, decree that public-spirited and earth-centered secularists must disavow a spiritual life. Transcendence may be cosmic or quotidian, reserved or refined, proselytizing or private. It may suggest supernaturalism, but it need not; indeed, one of my aims here is to strengthen the claims that, for a Jamesian, transcendence need not imply the supernatural and that strictly speaking, and in the spirit of James, it need not involve the transcendence of nature.

Transcendence may be strictly transient, momentary, and isolated, an experience discontinuous in each instance of its occurrence with the larger rhythms, patterns, and meanings of the lives it graces. Alternatively, it can compose the largest meaning in one’s life, the pattern of a lifetime. Transcendence may be a fruition, an experience of conclusion—“consummatory,” in John Dewey’s language—or it may be less punctuated and more persistently enduring. Dewey himself wrote a great deal about consummatory transcendence, but the latter sort, transcendence of a more stolid and stoical kind, suggests the consistent pattern and meaning of Dewey’s long life’s work, perhaps more than does that of any other American philosopher. His gravestone paean to “the continuous human community in which we are a link” summarizes that pattern and meaning with simple but powerful eloquence.3

Transcendence might strike like a bolt from the blue or be more like the almost imperceptibly accretive sands on a beach. It may be an event in life, small or staggering. It may be a dispositional attitude toward life that raises one’s sea level of happiness and the quality of experience in general, attuning the sensibilities to notice and appreciate a transcendent dimension of events that more somber natures miss. Or it may be the pessimist’s prayer of salvation, his escape from an immanent existence he finds all too oppressively real.

Transcendence can be triggered, on the one hand, by a tiny incident, a random sensation, or an excavated memory; or, on the other hand, it can be produced by large and baffling public events. An example of the latter might be the apparently sudden collapse of the Soviet bloc in the concluding years of the last century, especially for those whose entire comprehension of human possibility had been conditioned from birth to accept its permanence. The resulting psychic dislocation and scramble for personal meaning must have occasioned much transcendence, East and West.4

Transcendence may be unexpected and surprising, or it may be the object of methodical cultivation. My delight in the game of baseball, for instance, or in a particular game, sometimes catches me by surprise but on other occasions has to be tracked down like a shot lined deep into the gap.
The “national pastime” is public, and frequently baffling, but—with a respectful bow to documentary artist Ken Burns—it is a stretch to call it “large.” It is only a game; but then, there are times when life is best played at, too (see the discussion of “flow” in chapter 5). And F. Scott Fitzgerald was just wrong when he called it “a boy’s game, with no more possibilities in it than a boy could master, a game” without “novelty or danger, change or adventure.” Closer to the mark is the observation that it “has been a touchstone to worlds elsewhere.” But for me the transcendent dimension of this game is not “elsewhere,” it is (as in *Field of Dreams*) in my own back yard.

Transcendence may remind us of many a philosophical exercise in self-overcoming: the transcendental idealism of Kant, the ideal pessimism of Schopenhauer, the New England transcendentalism of Emerson and Thoreau, Nietzsche’s misanthropic egoism, or Santayana’s contemplative essentialism, to pick a random few. Jamesian transcendence actually has little to do with Kant’s a priori deduction of categories of the understanding; Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, and Santayana are all useful foils, illustratively antithetical to James in various ways. Emerson and Thoreau, as we will see, are closer to home in some respects, and we could cite countless literary allusions. James’s literary affinities, including Whitman and Emerson (suitably shorn of monistic, idealistic associations), reflect his commitment to taking personal, subjective experience seriously. The great critic Alfred Kazin graced us, shortly before his death, with sharp insight into James’s passionate respect for each person’s “own sense of the exceptionality of his existence” as part of “the axis of reality.” His deepest commitment was to “the throb of our actual experience.” His spiritual sensibility was not that of a true believer but of a “fellow soul.”

There is also the idea of transcendence as a weapon for combating extreme hardship and duress, or just boredom: we can transport ourselves imaginatively from the concrete situations in which we find ourselves, at least for a while, by taking thought of other times and places, by rehearsing poetry or listening (imaginatively if not aurally) to music, by meditating on eternity or its opposite, and by other ingenious mental strategies. This must be one of the single most valuable skills a person can acquire; certainly it always has been for the more resourceful innocents caught up in history’s periodic eruptions of insane irrationalism. Accounts of mental stamina among concentration-camp and Gulag survivors are among our most inspiring narratives of human endurance.

Transcendence may also take in the idea of personal accomplishment that exceeds expectation or overcomes special hardship: it is possible, many think, to transcend our genetic inheritance, the traumas of childhood, cultural deprivation, and so on. Poverty and ignorance are transcended much more often than we commonly appreciate. Astrophysicist Stephen Hawking
transcended the horrible debility of Lou Gehrig’s disease to write *A Brief History of Time*. And as a species we can speak of transcending the trend lines of natural and social history, becoming more cooperative, less belligerent, achieving some kind of progress in the transmission of an enlarged legacy to succeeding generations. This uplifting prospect of a cooperative, responsible, yet finite intelligence, *ours*, caring deeply enough about the millennial fortunes of remote posterity to identify strongly with them makes evolution, biological and cultural, the sine qua non of transcendence for some. The impact of the idea of evolution on humanity’s self-image, to date and to come, cannot be overstated, nor can its influence on James and American philosophy in general.

The notion of evolution is a big part of what is meant by the “cultural transmission” of values, inviting us to imagine that the influence we succeed in spreading among contemporaries and immediate successors may ripple through the ages and make a difference for more distant descendants. The complementary reflection that we have been shaped by the past, that we are in fact evolving, is perhaps more unsettling, but James shares Dewey’s enthusiasm for the speculation that, as Ray Boisvert puts it, “acts engaged in by individuals who are mere specks on the cosmic scale can have an ‘infinite reach’. . . because the ‘small effort which we can put forth is in turn connected with an infinity of events that support it.’”

In itself, evolution cannot make us care about the long-term human prospect; that is a result of subjective factors like temperament. But it is an indispensable condition of our caring if we mean to relate it to purposive action such as parenting, itself a fertile ground of transcendence for some of us. Daniel Dennett makes this fundamentally humane point, surprising those who think his materialist biases are hostile to such an imaginative and even romantic view of human interconnectedness:

One thing that does make us unique as a species is that for the last five or ten thousand years we have been the beneficiaries of conscious planning by our parents and their parents and the cultures in which we’ve resided. Today we are actively concerning ourselves with what the world is going to be like in the future. We have strong beliefs about this. They play a role in what Homo sapiens is going to be like a thousand years from now.

Dennett’s views in their totality, we will see, do not obviously make “elbow room” for this kind of “conscious planning” or, indeed, for a distinctive personal consciousness capable of transcending anything at all. But evidently his heart is in the right place; and I believe his head is, too, when he refuses to endorse a schism between nature and culture. All is in process, all is evolving, and this has the most profound implications for
our place in a total scheme we see but darkly. Whether Dennett has entirely appreciated all the implications of the position he has taken is questionable.

James was an unusually fecund, imaginative, and suggestive philosopher. It would not be difficult to sustain a case for emphasizing each of these associations, in turn, as importantly related to his philosophy of transcendence. Yet it is also tempting to dispatch potential confusion at the start by arbitrarily decreeing this or that association irrelevant.

The better approach, I think, is simply to have my say about Jamesian transcendence as I have come to think about it and to assure readers that I intend no slight if in the process I neglect anyone’s pet interests. The project of following James’s resolve to take subjective experience seriously in the only way any of us can, from his or her own angle of vision, has the necessary effect of “circumscribing the topic” and neglecting areas others might prefer to pursue. A circumscription is really a partial transcription of one’s own inner life. In particular, there are aspects of metaphysics, epistemology, and metaphilosophy that preoccupy contemporary neopragmatists such as Richard Rorty but that I treat only lightly and in passing. Much more waits to be said on this topic, more than I can or want to say, and I hope others will say it. We must all tell our own stories. So here are some disclaimers:

My interest in Jamesian transcendence is not motivated by a futile quest for some standpoint outside both “reality as a whole” (whatever that might mean) and our statements about it. I am not attempting to draw a reliable map to all possible senses of “transcendence.” I do mention several prominent vehicles and destinations in order to orient the reader who wonders what on earth transcendence might mean, but I have left others out. That is as much a reflection of my own subjectivity as a statement about important meanings.

Jamesian transcendence is in my view neither an epistemic nor an escapist impulse, both of which Rorty criticizes. True, James’s radical empiricist commitment to personal experience does make him more hospitable to talk about transcendent entities and phenomena than traditional empiricists, but hospitable, we will see, within a naturalistic context and as a humane expression of his pluralism. He denies no important truths about the history and contingency of human convention and belief, or about human limits.

Transcendence is usually presumed by its possessors to emit self-certifying reverberations of “reality” or information about a world (natural or fantastic) beyond the theater of the mind. Hallucinations do, too, of course; but then they are sometimes found out: “Oh, I was hallucinating.” Transcendent experiences do not usually get “found out” in this way by those who claim them. Transcendent attitudes or turns of mind are even less tractable than particular episodes, being the products of long experience and
reflection. An exception would be in the “conversion” experience, sudden, unexpected, and revolutionary. But in every life of enduring commitment to ideals in which one has invested much of oneself, conversion—typically signaling antecedent dissatisfaction and unhappiness—becomes increasingly improbable.

Descartes’s “clear and distinct perceptions” differed importantly from the “mental mark” of this sort of transcendence in at least one huge respect: Descartes meant to construct a foundationally coercive edifice of knowledge. Transcendent experiences may seem foundational to the individuals who report them, but their scope encompasses at most those individuals themselves, and even then are best understood not in terms of Cartesian certainty but more in the pluralistic sense of its absence. Others remain free to believe them hallucinatory, though the more charitable Jamesian response is usually a kind of agnosticism: not having had exactly those experiences, but noticing their evident power in the lives of those who report them, James urges upon us the epistemic equivalent of “hands off” wherever established facts trail what he calls “forced” and “momentous” circumstances of belief.

When someone identifies one of his own experiences as transcendent, he is making a much stronger statement about its vivacity and impressiveness for him than if he were simply to say that he had had a vision, an intuition, or a powerful feeling that might for all he now knows have been just a bit of synthetically or chemically induced mental weather signifying nothing. “I had a transcendent experience but . . . I might have just been hallucinating” or “my norepinephrine and serotonin levels were spiking” or “my medication was kicking in” would be very strange things to say in reflective response to one’s own transcendent experience, even if accurate at an isolated level of neurophysiology. The personal quality of our specific experiences is rarely so isolated from our “real” world that we are prepared to dismiss them out of hand.

It makes even less sense to cash out a transcendent attitude or habitually high default level of happiness in terms of causal factors sharply removed from the form of a person’s actual experience of life. Such a translation of personal experience into the generalized form of an explanation might not be literally false, yet it might be inappropriate, harmful to someone’s ends, or incompatible with our happiness. Pragmatists and their foes argue incessantly about the relevance of such considerations, the former insisting that nothing could be more relevant. For a Jamesian, taking experience seriously involves the rejection of single-level description in favor of a multiplicity of self-reckoning.

This is an important point, but it is not easy to grasp or hang onto. We will revisit and challenge it. For now we can anticipate James’s view by saying that in a way he thinks irrelevant the causes of our soaring and elevated
moments. If we have such moments, their experiential quality must be such as to insure their own validation if anything does. They are “real as experienced,” to an extent; that is, if we do not experience them as caused in this or that respect, do not know them as experiences of joyous insight or delight caused by X—where X might be neural network static, the brain’s timing mechanisms, or protein microtubules—then X is largely beside the point so far as transcendence is concerned. I say “largely” to suggest a limit, to the extent that certain epistemological and metaphysical issues are not allowed to take center stage or usher various candidate explanations from neurobiology, physics, or some other partial discipline into a starring role in place of subjective experience. For James the center stage of transcendence is always set by each of us in turn, however. Some transcendents, and some philosophers seeking to clarify the various modalities of transcendence, will undoubtedly prefer to keep issues and approaches on stage which will here be set aside, and that must be their prerogative if they mean honestly to tell the stories of their own enthusiasms.

But this is the story of Jamesian transcendence. Telling it accurately means emphasizing personal experience and identifying approaches he thought hostile to it. The reader can judge the adequacy and accuracy of the identification, but a few further comments to orient my approach may still be in order.

James derided the “bald-headed young Ph.D.’s” (ouch!) and their “desiccating and pedantifying” ways. His evident objection was not to their baldness, their youth, nor even their Ph.D.’s but to their cocksure belief in the exclusive primacy of an approach to philosophy that begins and ends in questions about the establishment of “certain knowledge” and insists on technicality and jargon at the expense of clarity for all except a very few specialists. James always declared himself on the side of experience, against “philosophy,” wherever the latter had been shrunk to fit the limited dimensions or stylistic exclusivity of a “school” or discipline. He scorned some epistemologists’ implicit view of reality as something necessarily twinned and correlated to whatever questions we happen at the moment to be asking about what and how we can know, as though abstract knowing were the highest purpose of life rather than one among many.

Still, it must be admitted that James is best known for raising and answering questions of an intrinsically epistemic character, about the grounds of belief and the criteria for asserting knowledge. But its answers far exceed the bounds of epistemological propriety, not because James did not know better but because he intended to advance a radically different way of thinking from that current among the devotees of erkenntnisstheorie in his own day as well as ours.

Philosophers, theologians, novelists, and others have written of transcendent experiences involving exalted self-surrender, when individual
personality and identity are submerged or annexed by some mysterious larger force, power, or entity, and consciousness is pervaded by impersonal awareness, a sense of heightened reality, expanded perception, or unification with “the infinite.” The object of so much psychic commotion has been designated “God” and countless cognate terms for divinity by some, but others have proposed different candidates for transcendent attachment. I will nominate a nonsupernaturalist candidate that I think James especially favored, while also remembering that he was temperamentally disposed to “favor” as many transcendent objects and ideals—metaphysical, natural, supernatural, or occult—as could be surmised to animate the inner life of even a single soul in the vastness of time and space.

So I must caution the reader always to bear in mind a distinction between James’s own personal enthusiasms and his pluralistic hospitality to those of others. Tolerance or sympathy being itself one of his ideals, he often enthused over views—more pointedly, over others’ enthusiasm for views—which in fact he detested personally. He sympathized with almost everyone’s spontaneous personal enthusiasms, their ways of meeting and “reacting on” life, without sharing them. And while he had his own clearly defined philosophical beliefs, he tried to refrain from using philosophy to discredit the experience of other persons. Many a commentator has failed to notice and apply this distinction and has run aground by miscasting James’s broad sympathies as personal endorsements.

By whatever name or nature, the large and mysterious something in each separate instance of the varieties of transcendent religious, moral, or aesthetic experience is supposed to be a source of transformative energy. Such experiences may instigate in the transcender a crisis and a radical alteration of self-ascribed personal identity, or they may reinforce an identity already forged. They usually revolve around a compelling perception, intuited thought, or sudden shift of feeling that seems to the transcender to portend authentic discovery and may conflict with treasured prior commitments. What is supposed to be “transcended” in such an experience is, in short, the subjectivity of the individual along with the “false consciousness” or conceptual errors that normally accrue to finite, limited beings like ourselves and that impede our achievement of happiness or personal fulfillment. “Fulfillment” presumably is relative: an epistemologist, unlike a graphic artist, musician, or truck driver, might be happiest and most fulfilled in studying the conditions or criteria of propositional knowledge. We all find fulfillment in terms closest to our own abiding interests and obsessions. But in each case, if discovery is claimed it is discovery of reality, some subset thereof, or some previously unnoticed aspect of one’s relation to it.

The common denominator in all discussion of transcendence, from whatever angle, seems to be this: it somehow engenders happiness, personal
fulfillment, or at least reconciliation to life in those who experience it, and it does so in part by radically altering the sense of self. In the extreme case, selfhood—not just one’s previous personal identity but the very notion of identity as essentially personal—is abandoned, overcome, repudiated, declared an error or an illusion, or in some other way corrected by the liberating influence of whatever insight is supposed to be contained in the experience. Subjectivity, the condition and consequence of being a limited and error-prone self, might then seem an obstacle to transcendence. A too-intimate relation of attachment to one’s own subjectivity, voluntary or not, might preclude the possibility of liberating insight and consequent happiness or personal fulfillment. So it might seem.

But the philosophy of William James affirms and celebrates subjectivity. Virtually every aspect of his thinking may be seen as an attempt to recognize and respect the integrity of individual experience as it is subjectively apprehended, no matter how odd it may seem from a more objective or intersubjective point of view. James also proposes, though, with his radical empiricism, that we acknowledge in our philosophizing a category of experience that is neither subjective nor objective but “pure” of such conceptual exclusions and discriminations. Pure experience is impersonal, apparently, in the fashion of transcendence as traditionally understood: impersonal because not concerned with the pretranscendent and limited self and not bound up in one’s subjectivity. It might seem most likely, then, that if James has anything important to say about transcendence, it will come out of his philosophy of pure experience rather than from his affirming celebration of subjectivity per se.

My thesis, to the contrary, is that James is an advocate for a type of personal transcendence owing at least as much to subjectivity as to pure experience. The structure of this book mirrors this uncomplicated line of thinking: Chapters 1 and 2 lay the groundwork in establishing the importance and ubiquity of the concept of subjectivity in James’s philosophy because of its preeminence in experience. Chapter 3 is the brief but crucial pivot point of the argument, considering and rejecting the suggestion that the impersonality of pure experience is strongly relevant to Jamesian transcendence. Chapters 4 and 5 reassert the primacy of subjectivity and personality in Jamesian transcendence and begins to explore a few of its implications.

I mean here to follow out some of the consequences of taking James seriously when he says, as in the epigraph above, that there is no substitute for personal experience. The “glimmer and twinkle” of transcendence is no exception. It is not enough to be “present,” in some Zen-like fashion of transparent and selfless purity, to our most compellingly significant experiences; we must bring ourselves, our persons, our peculiarities and idiosyncrasies, our histories, and our anticipated futures—in a word, our
subjectivity—with us, in our most transcendently stirring moments. Only thus, for James, may our lives accumulate concrete significance in their particularity. If this sounds more “existential” than pragmatic, perhaps that is because we have paid more attention to trendy existentialism than to the tradition of classical American philosophy. Alas.

“To the question about the meaning of life everybody answers with the story of his own life,” said Hungarian novelist Gyorgy Konrad. James heartily approves: this is how we should answer, and the existentialists were not the first to say so. But unlike many existentialists, pragmatists like James and Dewey also believe that the primacy of our personal stories need not preempt an inclusive social vision.

The future orientation of Jamesian transcendence, in particular, distinguishes it from alternatives and sits least comfortably alongside those more familiar eastern and quasi-eastern versions of transcendence that suppress subjectivity and will, renounce the self and its desires, and extol timeless passivity as the highest level of psychic ambition. Kitaro Nishida’s Japanese Buddhist version of pure experience, for instance, takes James in a Zen direction that I think false to his own intentions, toward the fusion of self and universe dissolving into a timeless meditation on nothingness. For James, as we will see, self and universe are never really one; never mind nothing! He defends the experience of those who believe in this oneness, but he does not corroborate it. Nor does James concur in the sentiment that “there is nothing that is not a manifestation of God,” though he sympathizes with the affirming sensibility uttering it.

“Pure experience,” experience shorn of labels that may distort it or prejudice our perception—subjective and objective, material and ideal—is not more transcendentally “real” than ordinary experience; it may just be a way of talking that James proposes that we adopt to remind ourselves not to let our overzealous conceptualizing intellects stand in the way of more immediate, less filtered relatedness to experiences of all kinds, to whatever extent that is possible at all. Our grasp of reality, or the sum of all actual plus all possible experience, grows as we come to appreciate the complexity of many points of view besides the one we happen to occupy. But of course we cannot remove the “filter” of our own subjectivity, though simply being aware of it is a big step forward in our respectful apprehension of so much experienced reality that lies beyond the borders of our own immediate consciousness.

My contention is that James’s own preferred approach to subjectivity provides as well the groundwork of a naturalized, pluralistic approach to transcendence that reflects and advances the pragmatic tradition in novel and inspired ways. One example is how the identification with the vast human community of the future, an identification lauded by some current thinkers, may for James have been a suitable object of transcendent
attachment, one fulfilling “religious” desiderata that is errantly thought by some James scholars to require supernatural backing. In addition, the discussion of Jamesian transcendence in chapter 5 touches on several related matters: the culture of computing and the unsettling, uncertain impact of new communications technologies in the so-called information age; the dangers of personal transcendence based upon subjectivity; the paradox of the future as a source of transcendence in the present; evolution and the idea of progress; destructive egoism vs. healthy subjectivity; the place of purposes and ends in human flourishing; the idea of “flow” or optimal experience; why Jamesian transcendence implies a fundamental continuity between the “inner” and “outer” realms of conscious human experience, and between the personal and the communal; and why pragmatists ought to be transcendentally happy at least some of the time, and optimistic about the human prospect.

The importance of my thesis to James scholars, beyond whatever value there may be in showing that James has a philosophy of transcendence and that it more or less coheres with the rest of his thinking, is that it adds an increment of clarity to the always troublesome and problematic concept of pure experience. I should not presume to declare its importance to nonscholars, though I have tried to write with them in mind and, in fact, consider myself one of them. I do not share the disdain of so many specialists for “popular” scholarship. James certainly did not. It is good for specialists to communicate with one another so that they can gain the benefit of informed, thorough criticism, but it is not good for them to communicate only with one another, unless they really have nothing of wider interest to communicate. The greatest possible importance of my thesis to nonscholars, then, may be its implicit argument that philosophy can matter, that a philosopher dead for nearly a century can still speak to us in a voice that is fresh, lively, accessible, and relevant to our own life struggles.

That is also its greatest importance to me. I, too, find James “the most inclusive mind I can listen to, the most concrete and the least hampered by trifles.”20 I have been listening and responding to James for many years now, not always agreeing with him but almost always gaining from the experience.

A Philosophy of Celebration

Robertson James once advised his brother to “stop your research for Truth (pragmatic or otherwise) and try and enjoy life.”21 William was probably touched by his sibling’s concern. He often gave vent, himself, to a feeling that life and philosophy follow different tracks. But he must also have felt irritation at his younger brother’s failure to grasp the motive forces in his life and philosophy that for him made philosophy, at least occasionally, a transcendentally enjoyable activity.